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Why students are treated *worse* than customers

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What do graduates owe to society, if anything, in the context of the marketisation of higher education? I believe that the only logical response to this question is that they owe society very little. The triumph of market-based arguments concerning who should pay for higher education, particularly in an English context, means that university students (and their parents) have been converted from social free-riders, to use the language of Friedmanite neo-liberalism, into customers benefiting from higher education as a positional good in providing a private, life-time benefit. If students do not have a right to a higher education how can they have an obligation to wider society? We cannot have it both ways. The question is *not* whether students are customers. It is patently clear, and has been for quite some time, that this is exactly what they are.

I am interested in why student academic freedom and student rights as learners are being undermined in contemporary higher education. Or, to put my concerns in the shape of a rhetorical question: ‘Why are students treated *worse* than customers?’ University students have become the target of a performative culture, one which previously has only really been associated with characterizing the way in which professionals – such as university lecturers – find their behaviour and attitudes (re)directed by audits, targets, incentives and controls demonstrating a fundamental loss of trust in their professionalism. University students are similarly afflicted by performativity in higher education. Students, in short, are no longer trusted to learn without being *seen* to be learning. This is the assumption that underpins the ‘student engagement’ movement.

There are many examples of what I call student performativity – the widespread use of attendance registers formerly associated with school level learning rather than university; the growing reliance on class contribution grading that superficially assesses vocal loquacity; the assessment of group work with all its blatant unfairness; the use of technology to purportedly measure levels of student ‘engagement’; and the ubiquitous use of Turnitin, yet another indicator of the way in which students are no longer trusted. Aside from bodily and participative performativity assessment regimes are putting increasing emphasis on emotional performativity demanding reflective confessions from students about how their learning has been shaped or ‘transformed’ by personal or professional experiences. To satisfy these demands students must make personal self-disclosures or simulate one in an inauthentic display of expressive individualism.

The key thing about performativity is that it distorts behaviour. Compulsory attendance rules encourage presenteeism as opposed to a desire to learn, class contribution grading rewards speaking at the expense of thinking or other deeper forms of engagement, whilst reflective exercises attempt to audit moral virtue rather than intellectual development. These examples place an emphasis on the visible and the measurable rather than real learning which is a lot harder to observe or judge. The civic dimension of higher education is meant to be about doing good but is being converted into a form of self-commodification placing a further performative demand

on students. They are encouraged to use community volunteering and gap-year tourism to puff up their CVs. Even being a student rep is promoted by student unions as a means of developing a useful set of work-related skills.

The demands of performativity violate a student's right to learn when, where and how they prefer. Student rights are not just about political protest and free speech. They are also about the right to reticence when they might prefer not to speak in class, the right to privacy with respect to their personal values and beliefs, the right to choose how to learn and to be treated as an adult undertaking a voluntary activity. Despite the rhetoric of student-centred what we have is the exact opposite of what Carl Rogers intended (Rogers, 1969).

Rights in education, particularly in relation to university education, are normally thought of in two ways. Firstly, there is the right *to* an education something enshrined in article 26 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948) in respect to elementary education. This does not mean that everyone enjoys a right to a university education although some countries, such as France, do give all students who have passed their baccalaureate a right to enter their local university. The debate about tuition fees and student protests in England, Germany, Quebec, South Korea and elsewhere globally show how much we focus on this idea of rights in higher education.

There is also a lot of attention given to rights *through* education. This is about the rights of students to receive a good quality university experience that also provides appropriate employment opportunities. Again, considerable debate, discussion and research surrounds this issue. However, I believe that we need to pay much more attention to rights *within* higher education. This refers to the way in which we treat students as learners. The argument I am making in this contribution is that a fair or just student learning environment is every bit if not more important than an effective one judged in terms of so-called 'learning gain'.

As Tristan McCowan has pointed out if we classify something as a right it cannot be 'conditional on any use that it is subsequently put to' (McCowan, 2013:134). Nor is a right the same as an obligation (McCowan, 2013:135). We do not currently treat a higher education as a right but as a private positional good. Even if we treated higher education as a right it would not necessarily follow that university students have particular obligations to civic society.

This all means that we have the bizarre situation where we are treating students as customers and at the same time becoming increasingly authoritarian about how they can learn at university. The illogicality of this is a bit like expecting someone to pay a high membership fee to join a private gym and then reproaching them for not doing enough exercise or putting on weight. Students are customers, made so by the widespread acceptance of the Friedmanite logic of labeling higher education a private good. Yet, if they are customers they should enjoy the right to engage with higher education in the ways in which they choose.

A 'performative customer' is a paradox, perhaps even an oxymoron. University students in England are customers but, at the same time, it needs to be remembered that they are also undertaking a voluntary activity in a non-compulsory phase of the education and are legally defined as adults. Currently they are being treated *worse*

than a customer since they are required to incur a substantial deferred debt in order to experience a university education at the same time as being subjected to an authoritarian regime of surveillance and control in the way they learn.

Note

This contribution is based on my forthcoming book:

Macfarlane, B. (2016) *Freedom to Learn: the threat to student academic freedom and why it needs to be reclaimed*, Routledge, New York & Abingdon.

References

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